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Two Different Approaches to the Relationship between Poetry, History and Philosophy: Walter Benjamin and Martin Heidegger

Michael Mack
(Durham University)

Introduction: Benjamin's Critique of Historical Continuity

The topic of this article¹ is the relationship between poetry, technology, history and philosophy. In what ways does Heidegger's philosophical approach to poetry differ from that of Benjamin? Both thinkers are preoccupied with how poetry interacts with a better understanding of history. According to Heidegger, poetry unfolds the truth of historical continuity. This article analyses how Benjamin questions precisely such a notion of truth in terms of historical continuity. As Peter Fenves has recently shown, from his early writings onwards, Benjamin interpreted historical continuity not in terms of truth but as a mythical distortion, which is based on the concept of original sin:

Benjamin's interest in the theme of "inherited" or "original" sin, on the one hand, and his reflections on the religious character of capitalism, on the other, derive from a basic thesis that finds succinct expression in these early notes [i.e. Benjamin's early notes "Die Bedeutung der Zeit in der moralischen Welt" ("The meaning of time in the moral world"), MM]: the category of guilt gives history its directionality—toward ever-greater guiltiness. Unlike causal interaction, the historical process is therefore irreversible: "In order to guarantee the unidirectionality of every occurrence, the highest category of world history is guilt [Schuld]. Every world-historical moment is indebted and indebting [Jedes weltgeschichtliche Moment verschuldet und verschuldend]." (Fenves 241)

This article will discuss how Benjamin reads poetry in terms of a disruption of the historical continuity of guilt. For both Heidegger and Benjamin, poetry offers us insights into truth. Their notions of truth are, however, different: Heidegger establishes the true as the site of historical continuity, whereas Benjamin recognises in this same continuity mythical distortions which declare mere life to be guilty.

In this context the article will explore how Heidegger and Benjamin's divergent readings of Friedrich Hölderlin's poetry highlight two radically different approaches to the question of philosophy's and literature's role in society at large.

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Does philosophy need to be of practical use? To some extent Heidegger consented to this question when he maintained that it is philosophy which is capable of establishing poetry's socio-political usefulness. According to Heidegger, a philosophical reading of Hölderlin's poetry delineates the foundation of the German people's historical continuity and identity. Heidegger's subordination of poetry to the larger socially useful determinants of history and politics has of course proven to be rather disastrous in its practical application (for a recent discussion of this, see Steiner 2011). Heidegger's attempt to be of political use contrasts with Benjamin's rejection of any direct impact of philosophy and poetry in the socio-political arena.

As Richard Velkley has recently shown, Heidegger's endeavour to establish philosophy's task within the finite realm of practical application is "clearly related to the turn in phenomenology 'to the things themselves,' begun by Husserl" (Velkley 3). Heidegger goes further than Husserl when he involves "the suspension of given theoretical constructions and the dismantling of 'sedimentations' of traditional concepts in practical life as well as theoretical inquiry" (Velkley 3).

What is at stake in Heidegger's attempt to prove the practical usefulness of philosophical discourse is the independence of philosophy—being concerned with immanent human issues such as history and politics—from theology (preoccupied as theology in its traditional Christian Western context seems to be with the transcendent and otherworldly). It is this modern and enlightened independence from theology which would guarantee philosophy's practical value and its objectivity. In his recent study *Heidegger, Strauss, and the Premises of Philosophy: On Original Forgetting*, Velkley has shown how Leo Strauss (here following and radicalising Heidegger) has traced as well as critiqued the practical pretensions of philosophy's and science's severance from theology as follows:

Philosophy was threatened by permanent subservience to theological orthodoxy. The modern philosophers, to recover something of the original natural freedom of philosophic questioning resorted to the effective means of securing protected freedom by redefining philosophy's goal as universally practical—above all, in practical opposition to theological authority. The gulf between philosophy and the city was bridged by identifying the ends of the philosopher and nonphilosopher, placing inquiry in the service of the relief of man's estate or 'science for the sake of power'. Rather paradoxically, the gains for philosophy in greater freedom and for society in diffusion of science and its material benefit (Enlightenment and 'progress') were necessarily made at the price of lowering philosophy's sights, as 'as unqualified attachment to human concerns becomes the source of philosophic understanding.' (Velkley 14)

Velkley's account of Strauss's critique of Heidegger's endeavour to make philosophy useful for socio-political applications helps highlight what is at stake in Benjamin's reading of Hölderlin's poetry, which contrasts with Heidegger's reading in that it does not subordinate the poetic to its potential practical commitments in society at large. This is not to say that Benjamin declares either philosophy or

poetry to be useless as such. On the contrary, Benjamin argues that art and philosophy may be of crucial socio-political importance. This is only, however, as long as a radical distance towards the injustices of past and contemporary history can be maintained. A crucial part of these historical and contemporary injustices of the status quo have to do with what we have become accustomed to exclude from socio-political practice and theory.

Here notions of inherited guilt and original sin play a crucial role. Mere life (as that of animals) inherits the curse of mythic guilt or original sin. It is this stigmatisation of guilt which renders sad the fact of being merely alive. Jacques Derrida writes about sadness in Benjamin's book on the German Trauerspiel (Tragedy) as follows:

It is true that, according to Benjamin, the sadness, mourning, and melancholy (*Traurigkeit*) of nature and animality are born out of this muteness (*Stummheit, Sprachlosigkeit*), but they are also born out of and by means of the wound without a name: that of having *been given a name*. Finding oneself deprived of language, one loses the power to name, to name oneself, indeed to answer [*répondre*] for one's name. (As if man didn't also receive his name and his names!) The sentiment of this deprivation, of this impoverishment, of this lack would thus be the great sorrow of nature (*das grosse Leid der Natur*.) It is in the hope of requiting that, of redemption (*Erlösung*) from that suffering, that humans live and speak in nature—humans in general and not only poets as Benjamin makes clear. (Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am* 19)

In a socio-political as well as in a poetic context, language attempts to free us from the stigmatisation of guilt and original sin that has been handed down by historical continuity (which Benjamin calls 'mythical'). This mythical language that pronounces mere life as having inherited the guilt of original sin (by way of historical continuity) is one of judgment. Benjamin sees in this language of judgment the site of the Fall: "The so-called fall arises from the excitation of a particular form of language, which rises above things and allows the language user to speak 'about' or 'over' (*über*) them as a result" (Fenves 144). As Andrew Benjamin has argued in his recent study *Of Jews and Animals*, the term *nature* has been abused to establish a non-relation towards that which has been deemed to be non-human, non-progressive, in other words, animalistic. The other becomes naturalised as a non-human species. As Andrew Benjamin has put it, "enemies do not exist because of nature; rather 'nature' is used to create and then define the other as the enemy" (*Of Jews and Animals* 7). This naturalisation of the other is "premised on the effacing of a founding relation" (*Of Jews and Animals* 37). The founding relation is that of life, which includes the animal.

This inclusion of the animal within immanent life is effaced in philosophy's abolition of the founding relation. The fact that the premise of philosophy's quest for practical usage is the exclusion of mere life—mere life inheriting original sin by way of historical continuity—indicates that there is still a theological dimen-

sion to the modern philosophical discourse about its presumed independence from theology's non-immanent concerns:

The limits of Descartes, and as shall be suggested Heidegger (insofar as the position of *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* is taken as central), is that their respective philosophical projects depend on identifying animals with life and excluding life from that which defines the propriety of human beings, an exclusion which, as has been intimated, is premised on the effacing of a founding relation. (Andrew Benjamin, *Of Jews and Animals* 37)

According to Derrida this exclusion is premised on the question of language: "All the philosophers we will investigate (from Aristotle to Lacan, and including Descartes, Kant, Heidegger, and Levinas), all of them say the same thing: the animal is deprived of language" (*The Animal That Therefore I Am* 32). Darwin's insistence on humanity's animalistic constitution is crucial in this context, because it provoked various re-instatements of the theological creed, according to which man was created in the image of God (instead of being part of the animal species). Resistance to Darwin's evolutionism reinforced quasi-theological tenets about humanity's transcendence of embodied, animal existence. As John Gray has recently pointed out, Darwin's insistence on the evolutionary family resemblance between the animal and the human posed a threat to the grand (but theological) promises of humanity's immortality:

Science had disclosed a world in which humans were no different from other animals in facing final oblivion when they died and eventual extinction as a species. That was the message of Darwinism, not even fully accepted by Darwin himself. For nearly everyone it was an intolerable vision, and since most had given up religion they turned to science for escape from a world that science had revealed. (*The Immortalizing Commission* 1)

This diminution of the theological grandeur of immortality threatens modern science's and philosophy's pretension to be useful: humanity—the very heart or, in other words, object of modern science's useful application—has been potentially demoted in the wake of Darwin's scientific discoveries.

One can read Heidegger's preoccupation with historical significance as a post-Darwinian attempt to ground philosophy and science's practical value for a human community that is teleological or quasi-theological—rather than subject to evolutionary chance. As Gray has shown, a humanist, secularised Christian tradition defined animals by their silence, their lack of language (as we have seen, this is also the topic of Derrida's investigations in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*) in order to valorise activity, productivity and the linguistic recording of historical deeds as the preserve of humanity's grandeur: "In Heidegger's neo-Christian view rats and tigers, gorillas and hyenas simply exist, reacting passively to the world around them" (Gray, *The Silence of Animals* 163). Heidegger writes in a philosophical tradition which contrasts the animal with the human on two interrelated accounts: first it declares that animals lack language and it then goes on to argue that the

silence of the animals offers proof of their inactivity, their boredom or the lack of any meaningful interaction with their environment: “Lacking any perception of the mysterious ‘Being’ from whence they came, other animals are no more than objects. Humans, on the other hand, are not objects, since they shape the world in which they live” (Gray, *The Silence of Animals* 163). History denotes this sphere of human deeds, from which is excluded the mere life of both animals and those human communities who are deemed to lack historical value. Benjamin’s refusal to subordinate poetry to issues of historical or political significance limns what the status quo effaces or excludes in theory and practice: embodied nature, the animal and those who have been naturalised in terms of animals. This is at stake in Benjamin’s rejection of poetry’s impact or service value for the socio-political status quo.

A Nascent Theory of Literature Developed out of Benjamin’s and Heidegger’s Respective Interpretations of Hölderlin’s Poetry

Against this background, the following discussion focuses on Benjamin’s and Heidegger’s respective readings of Hölderlin. This much traversed field of inquiry warrants further attention and rethinking partly because of the enigmatic character of Benjamin’s early essay “Two poems by Friedrich Hölderlin” of 1914–15, which saw publication only posthumously in Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno’s first edition of his essays (1955). Stanley Corngold has deftly described Benjamin’s “proud refusal to produce immediate insight or aesthetic pleasure” (Walter Benjamin, *Collected Writings* 36). He characterises the essay as “hieratic, cryptic, and high-flown” (Walter Benjamin, *Collected Writings* 36). What has not been sufficiently discussed is how this cryptic and high-flown style has a significant bearing on its content matter. Why does Benjamin refuse to give the reader the simple gratification of immediate insight? The following analyses how a stylistic gesture of refusal partly enacts Benjamin’s idiosyncratic political stance. As we will see, this early stance in fact shapes Benjamin’s extraordinary understanding of communism in his major treatise “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”. One of the main points of the argument developed in the following discussion is that Benjamin’s early philosophical or, as he calls it, “aesthetic” work on Hölderlin (and later on Romanticism in general as the topic of his doctoral dissertation) contributed to what I have called elsewhere his “political romanticism” (Mack, “Modernity as an Unfinished Project” 69). This term is provocative and runs counter to Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe’s recent take on Heidegger’s and Benjamin’s respective encounters with Hölderlin’s poetry. In what appear to be stark terms, Lacoue-Labarthe opposes Heidegger as romantic with Benjamin as modernist. He goes so far as to equate Heidegger’s Nazism with the essence of Romanticism, saying plainly “Heidegger’s poetico-political program is virtually indistinguishable from the Romantic program” (Lacoue-Labarthe 86). The equation of National Socialism with Romanticism seems to be quite persistent, and a more nuanced discussion of Benjamin’s approach to Hölderlin’s poetry

and its divergence from Heidegger's is crucial for a better understanding of issues of diversity and non-exclusion that lie at the heart of both the Enlightenment and Romanticism. As has been discussed in the opening section, what is at stake in this critique is the exclusion of what goes under the term 'animal' in a modern project that turns out to be a secular version of humanity theologically conceived as image of God. Far from being an uncritical defender of modernity, Benjamin insists on poetry as a self-sufficient yet incomplete form that resists various attempts at appropriation by modern ideologies.

The work of art's incompleteness is of course a major theme in his thesis on the romantic notion of criticism. It is this element of the incomplete that seems to call into question aesthetic autonomy: art does not speak on its own or, to be more precise, it only speaks fragmentarily when it speaks on its own and as a fragment it appears to ask for the endless work of interpretation that is the task of criticism. In his early Hölderlin essay, Benjamin grounds the notion of the unfinished not so much in the relationship between art and its criticism but within the infinite unfolding of what he calls the "poetic law". The "poetic law" is a law that seems to be enclosed within the hermetic structure of the work and yet is not so much a self-enclosed hermetic principle but a transformative force: "Only the power of transformation will make it clear and appropriate to declare that the poetic law has not yet fulfilled itself in this Hölderlinian world" (Walter Benjamin, *Collected Writings* 24). The poem is self-enclosed and at the same time incomplete, that is to say, in need of transformation. At this point the transformation in question does not concern any relationship to an outside world (the different readings in works of criticism), but rather denotes the different stages of its composition. Indeed Benjamin compares two versions of the same poet—one early one and one later—to exemplify the poem's self-enclosed process of transformation. This sounds like an attempt at a philological analysis of literary composition, but this impression would be deceptive: at the opening of his essay Benjamin makes clear that his concern is not with philology but aesthetics.

Aesthetics, at least from Benjamin's perspective, is a sub-discipline not of literary criticism but of philosophy. As a sub-discipline of philosophy it is concerned not so much with the genesis of a text but with its "truth". This pre-occupation with the truth of a work of art characterises both Benjamin's and Heidegger's approach to Hölderlin in particular and to poetry in general. Their respective understandings of what truth is in literature differ though, as we shall see, and this difference has important ramifications for their divergent interpretations of art's relationship to politics and society. In contrast to Heidegger, Benjamin discusses the truth of poetry within an intra-poetic sphere that seems to be detached from the conflicting demands and exclusionary pressures of competing political truth claims. Rather than addressing an extra-aesthetic realm, the poem seems to trace the development of its idiosyncratic itinerary:

This sphere, which for every poem has a special configuration, is characterized as the poetized [*das Gedichtete*]. In this sphere that peculiar domain

containing the truth of the poem shall be opened up. This “truth,” which the most serious artists so insistently claim for their creations, shall be understood as the objectivity of their production, as the fulfilment of the artistic task in each case. (Walter Benjamin, *Collected Writings* 24–25)

There seems to be a progressive development of truth, a *telos* of some sort, but crucially this teleology resides within the work of art rather than representing, by mimetic principle, some external progress—be that the progress of history or of a people, of an economic system, of science or of a political idea.

Benjamin’s break with ideas of mimesis and representation is significant. My reading of Benjamin offers a new perspective on his literary theory despite Benjamin’s critique of mimesis already having been analysed by Miriam Bratu Hansen, who has clearly shown how he and Adorno break with a traditional mimetic paradigm, even though both refer to mimesis. It is worthwhile quoting the long passage where Hansen explains the otherwise rather confusing use of the mimetic in Benjamin’s oeuvre:

As for Adorno, Benjamin’s notion of mimesis differs substantially from traditional uses of the term beginning with Plato and Aristotle, from illusionist imitation to contemporary norms of literary-artistic realism, whether in Marxist theories of reflection (*Widerspiegelung*) or fascist aesthetics. Benjamin draws on a wider range of anthropological, psychological, sociobiological (Roger Caillois’s work on *mimicry*), and language-philosophical strands of mimesis, rather than the aesthetic more narrowly understood as pertaining to works of art and standards of verisimilitude. This is to say that the mimetic is not a category of representation, pertaining to a particular relationship with a referent, but a *relational* practice—a process, a comportment, or activity of “producing similarities” (such as astrology, dance, and play); a mode of access to the world involving sensuous, somatic, and tactile, that is embodied, forms of perception and cognition; a non-coercive engagement with the other that resists dualistic conceptions of subject and object; but also, in a darker vein, “a rudiment of the once powerful compulsion to become similar and to behave accordingly.” (Hansen 146–47)

Whereas literature’s capacity has often been understood in terms of the mimetic preservation of what is or what has been, Benjamin emphasises poetry’s revolutionary potential which he interprets as the non-commoditised promise of modern technology in his late essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”. Hansen writes: “The political significance of this openness to the future, the possibility of things becoming something other than as what they were commonly perceived, is most strongly emphasised in the beautiful passage from the artwork essay that attributes to film the ability to explode, with its ‘dynamite of the split second,’ the ‘prison-world’ of our urban-industrial environment” (158–59). Diverging from the mimetic approach that tends to conceptualise literature as continuous representation of the past and the present, Benjamin’s nascent theory of literature provides a novel perspective on art as a breaking away from the historical continuity of guilt. As we shall see, Benjamin perceives the poem as a form of

birth. It creates a new cosmos that differs radically from the societal structures that have shaped human history.

In my reading, Benjamin emphasises literature's non-representational dimension, in order to appreciate it as a birth of the new and discontinuing. In this view, literature is not so much mimetic but nascent: it provides a mental space where humanity can discover novel forms of interaction freed from various historical determinants. What I call a *nascent theory of literature* differs from the prevailing mimetic one in that it does not subordinate the literary to the historical, the economic or the political but rather makes it the basis for a radical re-conceptualisation of other disciplines (such as history, politics or economics). In the twentieth century, a mimetic approach to literature was shaped by hermeneutics and phenomenology. Mimesis is a form of interpretation: by representing the world we interpret it. Poetry and its criticism engage in the interpretation of human existence. This is exactly Heidegger's approach to a philosophy of literature.

Heidegger has had a tremendous impact on literary theory and criticism, shaping various modern and postmodern readings of literature. Let me briefly discuss his influence on a critic who has played an important role within the English reception of Hölderlin in particular and of Romanticism in general, namely Paul de Man. De Man has argued that "poetic language interests Heidegger because it is not less but more rigorous than the philosopher's, having a clearer consciousness of its own interpretative function" ("Heidegger Reconsidered" 105). He goes on to define humanity as the "being that interprets itself by means of language" (105). As Karl Marx clearly understood, interpretation is a form of representation. Traditional philosophy has interpreted the world, but Marx set out not so much to interpret as to analyse and change the world. As he put in *The German Ideology*, "in reality and for the *practical* materialist, i.e. the *communist*, it is a question of revolutionizing the existing world, of practically attacking and changing existing things" (Tucker 169). Where Marx is concerned with economics, Benjamin attempts to do something similar for literature and art.

What I call a nascent literary theory shifts the emphasis from questions of mimesis, representation and interpretation, to a re-conceptualisation of literature as creating a new cosmos that has the potential to disrupt the continuity of guilt which history and traditional philosophy have established as regards mere life (that of animals as well as of human communities which have been declared to be of no greater value than that of animals). It differs from the prevailing approach that has been shaped by Heideggerians such as de Man, who have established a mimetic link between the non-literary act and its literary and philosophical interpretation. Interpretation helps preserve what is and has been. As de Man has put it apropos the poetry of Wordsworth and Hölderlin:

It is thus possible for a certain poetry to achieve the transition from the Titans to the interiority of interpretation, and to preserve in itself the traces of both these elements. The heroic and the prophetic elements that are found in many romantic poets derive from this Titanic origin. But poetry never allows this power to rush blindly to meet the unknown future of death. It turns back

upon itself and becomes part of a temporal dimension that strives to remain bound to the earth, and that replaces the violent temporality (*reissende Zeit*) of action with the sheltering temporality (*schützende Zeit*) of interpretation. (De Man, "Wordsworth and Hölderlin" 63)

Through its various rhetorical figures—as analysed by de Man in *Allegories of Reading*—literature attempts to achieve an interpretative feat of preservation. From this Heideggerian perspective, literature does not break away from but offers a foundation for established forms of selfhood.

Literature as representation struggles with the gap that opens between signifier and signified, between the thing and its image, between an act and its interpretation: "To the extent that language is figure (or metaphor, or prosopopeia) it is indeed not the thing itself but its representation, the picture of the thing and, as such, it is silent, mute as pictures are mute" (de Man, "Wordsworth and Hölderlin" 80). The represented face appears to be a defacement of the original face, of which it aims to be a copy but with which it cannot fully coincide and thus fails to be an exact equivalent. Radically departing from this mimetic approach to art, Benjamin does not mourn the gulf dividing the thing and its image. Indeed he argues against any attempts at such mimetic endeavours. Rather than imitate and copy what exists, poetry initiates a new beginning. It gives birth to new forms of life that preserve existing ones not via retracing their contours but through holding out the alluring appeal of transformation—a transformation that mends historical-political injustices in an act of creativity. Here literature does not copy philosophy as interpretative science (hermeneutics and phenomenology). Instead of being subordinated to philosophy, literature and philosophy are here on equal terms and become indistinguishable.

How Relevant Is Benjamin's New Approach to Philosophy and Literature?

Benjamin indeed fuses philosophy with literature. This fusion helps engender his distinctive kind of literary thinking that remains aloof—hence his high-flown style of writing—while at same time laying claim to the life changing potential within a serious approach to literature. In philosophical terms, Benjamin takes poetry so seriously that he develops in his discussion of two Hölderlin poems a novel version of Kantian transcendental philosophy. Throughout his intellectual work Benjamin's writing and thought was deeply shaped by Kant. One of Kant's most enduring influences on him was the notion of the transcendental. Influence here is not a passive reception of what has been received but the work of creative transformation. In this way the later Benjamin coins his own version of Kantianism that despairs of itself when he develops his version of a transcendental messianism. Transcendental messianism establishes the foundations of a break or rupture with the violent state of emergency that paradoxically characterises the 'normal' path of history and politics to which we have become accustomed. This article will delineate the contemporary relevance of early Benjamin's recasting of poetry into a transcendental mode of potential interruption that swerves away from historical

and philosophical continuities, thus paving the way for a new beginning outside the determinants of past trajectories.

In Kant's system, the transcendental outlines both the possibilities and the limits of human knowledge and experience. Introducing his version of the Copernican revolution, Kant declares the thing-in-itself or the noumenon as unreachable and ungraspable by human intellect. Crucially this noumenal sphere denotes the world that precedes Kant's revolutionary instalment and enthronement of human autonomy: transcendental inquiry establishes the impossible attainment of knowledge about extra-human essences (God, the supernatural, the non-human sphere of nature), but in doing so it opens up vistas of a new space where humanity can construct its autonomy unencumbered by traditional concerns about theological issues. As Robert Pippin has clearly shown, Kant's Copernican revolution inaugurated 'bourgeois' philosophy which became "central to the self-understanding and legitimation of the bourgeois form of life: the free, rational, independent, reflective, self-determining subject" (5). Benjamin was deeply attracted to the promise of freedom held out by Kant's political philosophy (and he was of course deeply aware of his own bourgeois family background).

The adolescent Benjamin became acquainted with Kant via the neo-Kantian thought of the German-Jewish philosopher and classicist Hermann Cohen. Cohen accentuated the formal aspect of Kant's philosophy that is encapsulated in the term 'transcendental', denoting a logical procedure via which thought gains its independence from empirical conditions and constraints. As Pippin has put it, Kant

could do justice to the inseparable intuitive content of concepts and preserve a notion of a priori knowledge by appeal to the claim that there were *pure* forms of intuition, and so there could be a way, independent of actual experience, to specify sufficiently something of the experiential nonconceptual content of any pure concept, and could do so a priori. (51)

In a sense, Cohen turned the Kantian transcendental into the foundations of all logical and scientific investigations. Cohen, however, liberated the logical from purely formal connotations:

To Cohen, logic was the queen of the sciences, but he was not satisfied with pure formalism. Philosophy does not end in logic, but logic must clarify the conditions of all cultural activity, from morality to art. Logic is indispensable in the understanding of human culture as an integral whole. Logic discovers the laws of form and function—laws which are themselves the mainspring of culture in its three main divisions: science, morality, and art. Therefore, Cohen's theory of knowledge is the core of his humanism because the conditions for producing general human culture are found in logic. (Willey 109)

Cohen's logical procedure that outlines the conditions of human culture is precisely denoted by the Kantian notion of the transcendental. The transcendental proposes *a priori* forms of knowing that constitute the foundations of Cohen's logic of science, art and morality. In his essay "On two poems by Friedrich Hölderlin", Benjamin

invokes the Kantian attempt to install knowledge that is independent of or *a priori* to encounters in the empirical world. He does so by citing the following quotation by the romantic poet Novalis: “Every work of art has in and of itself an *a priori* ideal, a necessity for being in the world” (Walter Benjamin, *Collected Writings* 19). The pithy sentence evokes a strong sense of aesthetic autonomy. It endows art with a force or necessity that Kant would only have allowed for morality or a moral philosophy of politics and history. The work of art has its own or autonomous necessity (or teleology) but crucially its force field is not disconnected from the world but is a “being in the world”. As we shall see, Benjamin’s thought oscillates in this tension between the work’s autonomy or break from the world as it is and the social or political repercussions that such quasi-messianic interruption may engender.

Benjamin composed his essay on Hölderlin at a time that proved to be important for his intellectual development, at the beginning of World War I. The intellectual and socio-political enthusiasm for the war shocked him. He was dismayed in particular about the pro-war writing of his former intellectual mentor Hermann Cohen. Cohen’s nationalist sympathies disillusioned Benjamin about the social and political significance of Neo-Kantianism. Cohen was one of the most renowned neo-Kantians and he was, in the eyes of the early Benjamin, a war-monger. This coincidence of a highly moralistic and political approach towards a logical (neo-Kantian) transcendental analysis of culture and the politico-ethical espousal of World War I made not just Neo-Kantianism suspect but cast doubt upon the subordination of art to extra-aesthetic concerns such as morality or politics. The primacy of the political and the moral could all too easily fall prey to moral and political justifications for exclusionary and violent forms of social interaction as most brutally practiced in warfare. Yet Benjamin’s disillusionment with Cohen in particular and Neo-Kantianism in general did not evince his wholesale abandonment of the formal sophistication of Kant’s philosophy. As has been intimated in the discussion above, Benjamin transferred the logical grasp of the notion ‘transcendental’ from its applied sphere of morality and politics to a seemingly cryptic discussion about the value of poetry. Here he stressed the transcendental conditions of the poem. These conditions seem to be set by the logical parameters of Cohen’s neo-Kantian thought. They establish the poem as an *a priori* entity, that is to say, as a work of construction that is independent of empirical experience. The poem is truly autonomous; it is conditioned by nothing else but itself.

The work of art is unconditioned to the extent that it is disconnected from the life of its author. Benjamin emphasises that there is a break between the poem and the poet. So great is the work’s independent being that it bears no resemblance whatsoever to the life of either the poet or even the life depicted within it. What Benjamin terms ‘the poetised’ [*das Gedichtete*] connotes the truth of the poem as something that is unconditioned, *a priori*. The notion of the poetised articulates the condition of the poem as an independent condition of itself or, in other words, a condition of its own making without a history, without even a poet or a people to which the poet may happen to belong. As such a radically autonomous, inde-

pendent being, the poem proves capable of determining a novel form of life: “In the poetized, life determines itself through the poem, the task through the solution. The underlying basis is not the individual life-mood of the artist but rather a life-context determined by art” (Walter Benjamin, *Collected Writings* 20). The poem establishes an entirely new space; it creates a new form of life.

Within the work of art we witness both the creation of different modes of living and the emergence of life that establishes a difference to our current one. The mature Benjamin will characterise this space as the messianic interruption of the sudden now (*Jetztzeit*) that breaks with the violence and exploitation that constitutes historical continuity. As a break with the violent practices that sadly characterise history’s continuity, Benjamin’s messianism is, as Derrida has pointed out, a bloodless one (Derrida, “Force of Law” 32). As Gil Anidjar has recently shown, the issue of blood is in Benjamin’s work closely bound up with his critique of historical continuity in which groups people are equated with the ‘mere life’ of animals: “And what Benjamin explains is that, along with life, blood became sacred through a series of rituals whose aim it was precisely to separate blood into different kinds” (9). By being bloodless, Benjamin’s messianism breaks with this exclusionary and potentially lethal separation of blood which has been perpetuated throughout history and justified with reference to the theological concept of inherited guilt or original sin (which Anidjar discusses as the history of Christianity). Rather than projecting finality and the restoration of a lost totality (lost during a fall into sin and corruption), Benjamin’s messianic interruption “is to be squared with the continual renewal of life—the continuity of the ‘*nach*’, the ‘always new’ (*immer neu*)—especially since it is buttressed by the effective presence of the ‘*ad infinitum*’ (Andrew Benjamin, *Present Hope* 43). The redemption at issue here does not put an end to history or to sublunary life as we know it. Instead it transforms life into a novel mode that sustains not only the present but also re-awakens what has been destroyed in the past. My reading of the early essay on Hölderlin contributes to a better understanding of redemption as a break with history that takes place within history. Benjamin’s transcendental messianism centres on such a break: it delineates the conditions that make possible the interruption with a way life that has been premised on the exclusion that is ‘mere life’.

The philosophical work in question here is not smooth. It is riddled with contradictions and unease. A new polis emerges not as continuity with what has been but as a disquieting interruption that breaks with established forms of social interaction. As we shall see, Benjamin is fascinated by the madness of the romantic poet Hölderlin. He sees in Hölderlin’s mental illness the seeds of a new politics precisely because of a ‘mad’ detachment from the violence perpetrated under the status quo. As Samuel Weber has recently put it, “What appears to fascinate Benjamin above all is the risk of madness” (Weber 74). Weber discusses a loss of sense that identifies things in current forms of meaning. Benjamin’s philosophy does not renew life by confirming accepted structures but by disrupting these structures. His understanding of what could create a new politics out of the sources of literature and philosophy is not acquiescent but profoundly disquieting. It is this uneasiness

that makes it intriguing. Benjamin's notion of messianic interruption is sustained by the tension between the secular and the sacred, the theological and the political, the distant and the impassioned, the extraordinary and the ordinary. Could it be that this oscillation of seemingly irreconcilable oppositions radicalises early Benjamin's attempt to create a space of art that is so radically independent of established ways of life that it could prove capable of creating hitherto inconceivable ones? Benjamin's defence of art's autonomy would then appear to constitute a new space of politics that breaks with what Heidegger understands by history. This space needs to be novel so that it is not liable to fall prey to old ways of thinking that are part of the continuum of history.

History's continuity perpetuates the wars and feats of exploitation from which the later Benjamin attempts to sever his intervention when he celebrates the redemptive now of messianic interruption. To the dismay of the early Benjamin, Cohen's enthusiasm for World War I indicates the close affiliation between historical continuity within thought (Neo-Kantianism) and the continuity of socio-political history. Turning Carl Schmitt's political theology on its head, Benjamin would later characterise this continuity as the permanent state of violent exception (Mack, "Transcendentaler Messianismus"). There is, however, in Benjamin's work a sustained 'continual' concern to break with a continuity of exclusion, destruction and exploitation. The early Benjamin focuses on art as a novel space where such interruption could take place. The later Benjamin thinks art, technology and the revolutionary potential of communism together: communism politicises the new cosmos created by art.

How Relevant Is Benjamin's Conception of Poetry's New Political Beginning?

The discussion above could give rise to two possible sets of doubt. First, a critical reader may point out the incongruence between the subject matter of Hölderlin's poetry and Benjamin's thought about the transcendental truth of the poem as the poeticised. As has often been noted, Hölderlin's poetry is not detached but closely involved with empirical events and places. His powers of description are stunningly realistic.² His poetry often seems to have the almost uncanny power to evoke geographies visited by the poet (such as Bordeaux and the south of France), not to mention the bemoaning of loss and absence as the mantra (as it were) of Hölderlin's poetry. In both of the two versions of the same poem which is the subject matter of Benjamin's essay, the importance of the people looms large: in one, the poets are characterised as "of the people"—"We, the poets of the people, gladly among the living" ("The Poet's Courage")—and in the second the poets are "the tongue of the people" ("Timidity"). How does this close involvement square with Benjamin's Kantian emphasis on transcendental conditioning and, associated with it, the *a priori* as independence from existing empirical reality? Second, a critical reader

²For a detailed discussion of Hölderlin's realistic powers of description see Adorno's essay "Parataxis: Zur späten Lyrik Hölderlins".

may ask in what ways Benjamin's concern with the transcendental conditions of poetry as the *a priori* of its self-enclosed making can contribute to any work that may enable innovative forms of the social and political. Is not politics a rather straightforward affair that is closely grounded in the empirical social sciences and socio-economic practices?

Let me first address the first set of concerns. The question of Hölderlin's literalism as opposed to Benjamin's insistence on poetry's independence from any form of literal or empirical conditioning is in fact related to doubts about how art can in any way be useful to large societal concerns. Scepticism about whether Benjamin does justice to Hölderlin's realistic powers of description replicate the structure of the second set of concerns. They centre on the discrepancy between the suffering that characterises the current state of affairs within empirical life and art's break with the status quo of empiricism. Benjamin addresses the first set of concerns himself when he asks why Hölderlin seems to connect the life of the poets to that of the people:

Why doesn't the poet celebrate—and with a higher right—the *odi profanum*? This question may, indeed must be asked wherever the living have not yet founded any sort of spiritual order.—In the most surprising way, the poet reaches with both hands into the alien world orders, grabs at people and God to raise within him his own courage—the courage of poets. (*Collected Writings* 23)

Benjamin maintains that we are obliged to ask why the poems under discussion do not celebrate a disdain for the profane and the popular, in short, the people. This question must be asked because under current conditions the life of the profane is radically severed from any spiritual order: the living or the people “have not yet founded any sort of spiritual order.” Benjamin goes on to say that the poet enacts the foundation of such a spiritual order of the people within the self-enclosed sphere of the poems. The autonomy of art allows for such a foundation. The foundation itself is non-dualist (and in this way non-Kantian because it bridges the gulf between the realms of nature and freedom). The substance of the poetised names this foundation as the reconciliation or fusion between the order of perception and intellect.

The poetised as the law of identity establishes “a perceptual-intellectual order, the new cosmos of the poet” (Walter Benjamin, *Collected Writings* 24). The spiritual is part of the intellectual sphere and the perceptual is the perception of empirical life as it is. These two spheres cannot be reconciled in the conflict-ridden state of the present. Only the free space of art allows for such reconciliation between spiritual/intellectual meaning and empirical/perceptual life, between the Kantian realms of freedom and nature. As Fenves has recently pointed out, Benjamin tries to extend the reach of metaphysics as a science of things to being at the same time a science of meaning: “Along with accounting for the basic concepts of being, it must bring out the categories of meaning (*significare*, *Bedeutung*), which, in turn, determine—tautological formulations are almost unavoidable here—the different

modes in which meaning means a meant-thing” (Fenves 159). However, this does not imply that the sign which has historically come to denote a thing is its true meaning: “Far from being a given, the nature in the human being is product of interpretation, and the first thesis of interpretation consists in taking the relation between self and world to be in need of interpretative practices” (Fenves 74). What is crucial here is that the creative work of interpretative practices unhinges the sign-system of historically established interpretations. These historically established sign systems or interpretative strategies belong to the profane sphere of immanent history (the status quo which still shapes the contemporary setting). Strikingly, Benjamin’s politics is marked by this tension between the profane and the spiritual, between historical materialism and theology, between the competing influences of Bertolt Brecht and Gershom Scholem. His notion of messianism would allow for a coexistence of these tensions where the oppositions in question are no longer oppositional but complementary. The early Benjamin sees such work of infinite completion (rather than competition) taking place in Hölderlin’s poetry. It is the infinite task of both philosophy and literature. Here the poet gives birth to “the new cosmos” where humanity lives the infinite task of a never-to-be-completed fusion of intellect and perception. Within this novel order the profane (the people) ceases to be simply profane.

It is important to emphasise how strongly Benjamin maintains that the new cosmos of the poet has nothing to do with our empirical one. The myth of the poem bears no resemblance to the Hellenic myth (which, according to Benjamin, is part of humanity’s state of corruption) and the people featured in the poem are radically other than either current or past forms of human community:

Is this life still that of Hellenism? That is as little the case here as that the life of any pure work of art could be that of a people; and as little the case, too, that what we find in the poetized might be the life of an individual and nothing else. This life is shaped in the forms of Greek myth, but—this is crucial—not in them alone; the Greek element is sublated in the last version and balanced against another element that (without express justification, to be sure) was called the Oriental. (*Collected Writings* 35)

Clearly, Benjamin’s vocabulary is Kantian. Significantly, he transfers Kant’s purity of reason to that of art. Nevertheless there is a stark dualism separating “any pure work of art” from the profanity of the people that replicates the Kantian divide between pure reason and the pathology of our (natural) inclinations. Benjamin extends the incompatibility between the purity of poetry and the empirical life of a people to the discrepancy between Hellenic myth and what he calls the Oriental.

In his letters and in his essays on tragedy, Hölderlin confronts the Greek with its apparent opposite, the Oriental. Benjamin is quite close to Hölderlin’s thought when he elaborates the radical interconnection achieved via art. In a letter of 28 September 1803 to the publisher Friedrich Wilmans, Hölderlin characterises the distinctiveness of his Sophocles translations as follows: “Greek art is foreign to us because of the national convenience and bias it has always relied on, and I hope to

present it to the public in a more lively manner than usual by bringing out further the Oriental element it denied and correcting its artistic bias wherever it occurs” (*Essays and Letters* 215). Hölderlin translates Greek texts against their grain. He foregrounds that which is ostensibly repudiated in them.

The Oriental is what the Greeks defined as the opposite of their civilisation, namely, as barbarian (*barbaroi*). In a later letter of 2 April 1804 to Wilmans, Hölderlin argues that his translations bring about what Freud would later call the return of the repressed. The Oriental is what the Greeks deny themselves. This denial is a repression of what is part of their being. Hölderlin’s “eccentric enthusiasm” reveals the unacknowledged presence and over-determination of the repressed: “I am certain,” he writes to Wilmans, “I have written in the direction of eccentric enthusiasm and thus reached Greek simplicity; I hope to continue to stick to this principle, even if that means exposing what was forbidden to the original poet, precisely by going in the direction of eccentric enthusiasm” (*Essays and Letters* 220). What Hölderlin describes here as “eccentric enthusiasm” compares well with Benjamin’s notion of interruption: being eccentric, it pushes an entity to break with its homogenous self-image and in doing so persuades it to find a multiple identity in what is perceived to be other than itself. By evoking the Oriental within the confines of Hellenic myth, Benjamin emphasises that the people of the two Hölderlin poems under discussion are not that of a homogenous group. Rather they are a multitude of difference; they are Greek and what the Greeks saw as their other, the Oriental.

Despite the stark dualist opposition between a people and pure art, Benjamin does not establish a dualism between social issues and aesthetics. The divide between the life of poetry and that of society in its present and past forms serves to reinforce the necessity of a “new cosmos” established by “pure art”. It is the birth of this new cosmos that offers an alternative space where humanity can truly flourish, unencumbered by the exclusionary practices under the status quo. The Oriental not only disturbs the purported homogeneity of a people (the Greeks) but, according to Benjamin, it also denotes the force to which such disturbance of established forms of exclusion and suffering may give rise. By unravelling the assumed homogeneity of Hellenic myth, the Oriental founds connections rather than oppositions. It pushes the Greek to its eccentric opposite (the Oriental) and connects the two. What is crucial here is that the contemplation of art accomplishes this connective work. Here it becomes apparent that poetry in all its purity (not being driven to have a direct or specific impact) has huge social impact: “The contemplation of the poetized, however, leads not to myth but rather—in the greatest creations—only to mythic connections, which in the work of art are shaped into unique, unmythological, unmythic forms that cannot be better understood by us” (Hölderlin, *Essays and Letters* 220). Hölderlin’s famous term “holy-sober” (*heilig nüchtern*) describes this state of all-inclusiveness which abstains from adopting specific terms of judgment as derived from mythic-historical coordinates: “sobriety designates a condition of nonenthusiasm and nonexcitement: there is no god to whom the existence of the sober one points; and there is no mental state that mediates between the inner and

the outer worlds” (Fenves 24). The poetised is the truth of poetry which resides in what Benjamin calls the law of identity. The law of identity determines each isolated part of the work of art and in doing so frees it from isolation. It establishes a new cosmos of infinite connections. It renders myth unmythic; frees it from that which excites judgement and removes it from an exclusive location within one people and one culture. While the law of identity appears to be purely aesthetic, it has a clear impact on societal issues precisely by dint of its radical independence from various political pressures that would force it to reach compromises with practices of opposition and exclusion characteristic of society’s status quo:

This law of identity states that all unities in the poem already appear in intensive interpenetration; that the elements are never purely graspable; that, rather, one can grasp only the structure of relations, whereby the identity of each individual being is a function of an infinite chain of series in which all essences in the poetized are revealed as the unity of what are in principle infinite functions. No element can ever be singled out, void of relation, from the intensity of the world order, which is fundamentally felt. With respect to all individual structures—to the inner form of the verses and images—this law will prove to be fulfilled, so as to bring about, finally, at the heart of all poetic connections, the identity of the perceptual and the intellectual forms among and with another—the spatiotemporal interpenetration of all configurations in a spiritual quintessence, the poetized that is identical with life. (Walter Benjamin, *Collected Writings* 25)

I have cited this rather long and dense quotation because it questions a complete disconnection between poetry and life. Benjamin does not advocate an escape into autonomous art that leaves behind worldly or societal concerns. Indeed his usage of the term “world order” reinforces a conception of poetry that lies at the heart of society. At the end of this important quotation the poetised, or the truth of poetry, indeed coincides with life. By establishing an infinite number of interconnections which render each being free from isolation, poetry’s law of identity becomes identical with life itself. What emerges as truth here is how the radical duality between pure art and society in its established form illuminates the distance that separates the destruction perpetrated under the status quo from life’s non-exclusive breadth and depth. Poetry’s law of identity describes life’s infinite, integrated and interconnected diversity of difference which, under the current state of affairs, can only find its abode within art.

Art gives birth to a new cosmos in which life is born anew because it is determined not by the status quo of historical sign systems but by what Benjamin calls the poetised or the law of identity, which precludes judgment, guilt and homogeneity. The poet’s death at the end of the poem accentuates the difference between art and the destructive life of current societal formations. The poet as depicted in Hölderlin’s poetry has to die in order to live the limitless interconnection of the world: “The poet does not have to fear death; he is a hero because he lives at the centre of all relations” (Walter Benjamin, *Collected Writings* 34). The courage of the poet is the courage to let go of societal conventions that stand in the way of

poetry's infinite connectivity: "All known relations are united in death, which is the poet's world" (Walter Benjamin, *Collected Writings* 34). There is an underlying anxiety of death in the two versions of the Hölderlin poem as discussed by Benjamin. The "courage" and the "timidity" of the two titles name a certain relationship to danger and death which Benjamin denotes as heroic. This is not a military heroism. Rather it is a poetic one that flouts societal norms and standards and thus courts danger, if not death. In contrast to the heroism of the soldier, the heroism of the poet does not obey orders and conventions but instead overturns what society expects of its members. It is the individual's refusal to subject his body and soul to the regulations of the body politic.

This refusal has often been dismissed as madness. Hölderlin himself was diagnosed as mentally ill and the theme of madness looms large in Hölderlin's literary work (in particular, in his drama *The Death of Empedocles*), as well as in his essays and letters. In the two versions of the poem discussed by Benjamin, madness is not named as such, but rather depicted as immense vulnerability, as the poet's openness to the intrusion of danger and death. The poet's (mad) heroism consists in the abandonment of any *cordon sanitaire* that could protect the self against harm and impending mortality; his courage or madness is consubstantial with a loss of immune system that defends the self against the outside world. Furthermore, the same immune system can fall prey to autoimmunity. The courageous/mad poet has realised that the apparent exclusivity of opposites (such as between the self and the outside) are in truth relational rather exclusive and hence there is no longer any need for self-defence (such as is enacted by the immune system). This radical openness of the poet to the world calls into doubt the Kantian transcendental *a priori* that serves to ensure independence from the contingency and moral hazards that sometimes shape empirical conditions. Kantian autonomy immunises self and society, protecting it from the dreaded pathologies of embodied existence. How can we reconcile the duality Benjamin establishes between pure art and the destruction perpetrated under the status quo with his argument for a radically non-dualistic, radically interconnected world? Benjamin has a reason not to forsake a neo-Kantian idealism of some sort. This is so because he needs to find a strategy by which he can establish a realm of freedom.

This realm of freedom is precisely the new cosmos created by poetry. The dualism between the destruction perpetrated under the status quo and the birth of new life under the aegis of art is necessary in order to enable within this new life the reign of non-duality or, in other words, of the infinitely relational. The early Benjamin refers to Kant's transcendental idealism in order to theorise art as a free space where the status quo of history and politics can be transformed. He constructs a divide between art and the destructive life that determines the current state of affairs only to dissolve it within the new cosmos of the poem itself. Within this new cosmos there is no longer any dualism "for the ultimate law of this world is precisely connection" (Walter Benjamin, *Collected Writings* 32). Strikingly, Benjamin's move from a dualism that separates art from the status quo, to the abandonment of all duality within the new cosmos of the poem, retraces Hölderlin's own

course from the Kantian *a priori* to a Spinozian conception of an interconnected universe governed by palingenesis as encountered in his study of Herder (see Constantine 166–68). As Hölderlin writes in a letter of 24 December 1798 to his friend Isaac von Sinclair:

Everything is interconnected, and suffers as soon as it is active, including the purest thought a human being can have. And properly speaking an *a priori* philosophy, entirely independent of all experience is just as much nonsense as a positive revelation where the revealer does the whole thing and he to whom revelation is made is not even allowed to move in order to receive it, because otherwise he would have contributed something of his own. (*Essays and Letters* 117)

Diverging from Spinoza's rational universe of holistic determinism, where suffering has a rather diminutive dimension, Hölderlin's Spinozian vision of an interdependent cosmos acknowledges the presence of pathologies. Indeed the relational back and forth motion between the diverse elements of this interconnected world cannot but cause disquiet. The unease in question here is, however, not destructive but one that promotes rather than hinders transformation. This is why—within this context of a mutually receptive or open interconnectedness—Hölderlin discusses revelation as collaborative work achieved by both creator and creation. We become detached from established forms of life when we are exposed to the unpredictable forces of an interconnected universe and one result of such exposure is madness.

Until roughly the onset of modernity, and Hölderlin's long eighteenth century in particular, madness had a touch of the divine about it. It was often associated with inspiration and the mad were seen to be communicating with supernatural powers: as Michel Foucault has put it, “until the Renaissance, the sensibility to madness was linked to the presence of imaginary transcendences” (Foucault 58). Foucault locates the denigration of madness as mental illness around the time at which Hölderlin was diagnosed as incurably ill:

the constitution of madness as mental illness, at the end of the eighteenth century, affords evidence of a broken dialogue, posits the separation as already effected, and thrusts into oblivion all those stammered, imperfect words without fixed syntax in which the exchange between madness and reason was made. The language of psychiatry, which is a monologue of reason about madness, has been established on the basis of this silence. (Foucault x–xi)

Hölderlin had to endure this process of marginalisation and silencing at the end of the eighteenth century and after his long journey on foot from Germany via the Alps to the south of France and back, Hölderlin's status as an outsider was reinforced. His dishevelled exterior was certainly no longer acceptable within bourgeois society and he was to many of his old friends a subject of exclusion. In a famous letter to Casimir Ulrich Böhlendorff of November 1802, Hölderlin celebrates his madness or his detachment from the exclusionary practices of society as the life of interconnection with nature, the divine and the people of Bordeaux: “The

violent element, the fire of the sky, and the quiet of the people, their life in the open and their straightforwardness and contentment, stirred me continually, and as one says of heroes I can probably say of myself: that Apollo has struck me" (*Essays and Letters* 213). The description of the sun as a "violent element" and "fire of the sky" anticipates the paintings of Van Gogh. Hölderlin undergoes a certain detachment from the status quo: he has become receptive to what the historical sign system denotes as the animal or the non-human (the sun and Apollo). The people in question are not homogenous and closed off from the elements, animals and the cosmos at large, but instead live the life of interconnection, "in the open". The poet radicalises this openness by being touched not only by the elements but by the god himself: the moving phrase "Apollo has struck me" conveys both a certain distance from societal structures and the vision of a true life in the open of an interconnected universe. A radically porous relation to the world comes at the price of detachment from the status quo.

According to the early Benjamin a dualism between pure art and the status quo offers purchase on such a relational life of non-duality within the new cosmos created by poetry. Everything depends on the priority of the poem. As shall be discussed in the following section, Heidegger prioritises history and people-hood. He even reads Hölderlin's people of Bordeaux in terms of exemplifying German essence. By contrast, Benjamin "turns the people into a sensuous-intellectual function of the poetic life" (*Collected Writings* 29). I have discussed quotations from Hölderlin's letters in order to highlight the way in which Benjamin's philosophical and rather abstract discussion is nevertheless faithful to Hölderlin's conception of an interconnected universe created by poetry. The isolation of the poet within a society based on various forms of hierarchy, exploitation and exclusion is a theme that runs through Hölderlin's poetic cosmos: the famous expression from the elegy "Brod und Wein" [Bread and Wine] "und wozu Dichter in dürftiger Zeit" [and what are poets for in a desperate time?] (*Sämtliche Werke* 109) emphasises the gulf that separates the poem from its place within contemporary society.

Poetry and Politics in Heidegger and Benjamin

Benjamin's claim that Hölderlin turns the people into a function of his poetry may strike some readers as odd. Hölderlin calls the poets "tongues of the people" ("Timidity"), but according to Benjamin, the people concerned here have no social existence, whilst being a substantial part of the new cosmos created within the mental space of the poem. There the people can truly be the people of a non-exploitative and inclusive society. The new cosmos of the poem offers a stark contrast to the one prevalent now, a contrast that has the potential to further work towards a new socio-political space that transcends the politics with which we have become familiar over the course of human history. Such work would help restore bygone lives that have been damaged by past practices of exploitation. Building upon Hölderlin's notion of an eccentric enthusiasm, Benjamin renders a given identity strange, non-coincident with itself. In this way Hellenism recognises itself

in what it apprehends as its opposite, namely the Oriental. The people celebrated in Hölderlin's poetry are those who have swerved away from homogeneity to the law of an interconnected identity that characterises the life of the new cosmos as engendered by poetry. It is in the discussion of a complex relationship between poetry and the people that Benjamin's philosophical approach towards literature differs from that of Heidegger. As Timothy Clark has shown, Heidegger's philosophy attempts to bring about "art's death" (64). The death of art had of course been a concern of Hegel's dialectic and indeed Heidegger's attempted death of art is quite Hegelian. But it is not so much Heidegger's new idea as his radicalisation of Hegel's sublation of art within politics and secular history. According to Pippin, Hegel's conception of modernity is marked by both the proto-Heideggerian death of art and the privatisation of religion:

A great subordination of the roles of art and religion in modern life (they both have become essentially "things of the past") and defense of what Hegel himself calls the "prosaic" character of modern bourgeois life, the unheroic life of nuclear families, civil society, market economies, and representational democracy. Modernity is our unavoidable philosophical fate, and its fate is, at least in essentials, the rational realization of freedom. (Pippin 64)

In contrast to Hegel, however, Heidegger's writing about modernity is quite ambiguous. On the one hand, he realises that it is "our unavoidable philosophical fate" (unavoidable nihilism being modernity's inner logic, as he discusses in his writings on Nietzsche) and on the other, his philosophy questions the anthropocentrism that he finds most markedly announced at the beginning of modern rational thought, in the work of Descartes. From *Being and Time* (1927) onwards, Heidegger takes issue with the human-centred wilfulness of modernity. In contrast to ancient thought, modern Cartesian philosophy does not allow a place for the unconcealed. Modernity seems to be pre-occupied with calculation: "In modern metaphysics, the sphere of the invisible is defined as the realm of the presence of calculated objects. Descartes describes this as consciousness of the *ego cogito*" (Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* 125). As a form of protest against the modern predominance of the calculating moment, Heidegger increasingly turns his philosophical attention to the truth disclosed in poetry, where he finds that being lies beyond the all-too-certain illusion proffered by the clarity of numbers. This aversion to calculation and, associated with it, human wilfulness has aroused the interest of contemporary eco-criticism. Clark describes Heidegger as a godfather of contemporary ecological consciousness, for example:

The attack on the deeply anthropocentric assumptions of Western thought and religion gives his work an ethical force. It is chastening to human pride in a way comparable to the ethics of the 'deep ecology' movement. Against the traditional metaphysical drive towards a timeless perspective, a view from nowhere, Heidegger's thinking is based on an acceptance of human finitude. (37)

Heidegger's critique of the will and of anthropocentrism (as both narrowing down truth to a question of the calculable or, in other words, Cartesian certainty) informs his interest in Hölderlin's poetry. Heidegger's depiction of technology as *Gestell* [enframing] attempts to shed a light on the distortion of modern anthropocentric representations of the world. As we have seen in the discussion of Benjamin's early essay, Hölderlin's poem is permeated by a vision of an interconnected universe where the reductive logic of calculation is only a tiny part of a larger, infinite cosmos that cannot be abridged as a simple equation. This is exemplified in the opening of "Bread and Wine" where the bourgeois sphere of "gain and loss" characterises the present which excludes the openness of poetry.

While Heidegger criticises the modern reduction of truth to a question of anthropocentric and utilitarian calculation (as an enframing, as a *Gestell*), he nevertheless upholds a conception of art as a representation of being. For him, art discloses truth and Benjamin does not dispute this either. The truth which Heidegger discovers in poetry differs, however, from that which characterises Benjamin's understanding of the messianic-natal rather than the representational or mimetic actuality of the work of art. As we have seen, Benjamin theorises poetry as a key to societal transformation precisely because it is detached and removed from the harmful and exploitative practices that shape our current condition of existence. The poets are the tongues of a people, which is not to be reduced to the homogeneity and exclusiveness that attaches to the historical and political connotations of the word *Volk* (this is of course especially pertinent to the time during which Benjamin composed his essay at the beginning of World War I). Whereas Benjamin denies that Hölderlin's poetry has any relation to the historical and political existence of a people, art "for Heidegger takes place as a potentially disclosive event within the horizon formed by the word of a specific historical people (*Volk*)" (Clark 65). As disclosure of the specificity of a historical people, Heidegger's notion of the truth of art engages a reductionism of sorts, one that does not reduce what it discusses to a question of numbers, but to a matter of history and ideology. By turning poetry into a condition of itself, Benjamin thus attempts to avoid the exclusions that characterise the reduction of art to historical or ideological truth.

Heidegger's opposition between earth and world prepares for his reduction of poetry to a disclosure of historical and political truth. Here anthropocentrism enters Heidegger's thought via the backdoor in that he does not acknowledge his anthropocentric stance although it clearly emerges when he contrasts the non-disclosure of the earth with the openness, the lightening, the *aletheia* or undisclosedness of the world that characterises humanity. The world discloses itself as the truth of our historical being: "Wherever those decisions of our history that relate our very being are made, are taken up and abandoned by us, go unrecognized, and are rediscovered by new inquiry, there the world worlds. A stone is worldless" (Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* 43). The contrast between the natural world of the stone and that of the real world as founded by human history is certainly open to the charge of anthropocentrism. Heidegger nevertheless hedges his truth claims by saying that the being of this historical world can never reach the

level of certainty practiced in modern calculations: “The *world worlds*, and is more fully in being than the tangible and perceptible realm in which we believe ourselves to be at home” (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 43). The truth of the human world is contingent; Heidegger has clearly abandoned a belief in humanity’s willed construction of history. History happens and cannot be planned; humanity’s existence is thrown and any construction of a plan or meaning within this “Geworfenheit” [thrown state of being] is subject to death and finitude.

The absence of any constructive element in Heidegger’s notion of history may hold out the promise of an open-ended and non-exclusive conception of humanity. It becomes highly problematic, however, when Heidegger espouses the historically and politically contingent as the disclosure of truth. He explicitly does so in the early thirties: Heidegger idealises temporality and contingency in his Freiburg seminar “Logic as the Question of the Essence of Language” from the summer of 1934, where he speaks “of our membership in the people” and concomitantly of “our submission to contingent temporality” (*Gesamtausgabe* 58). The contingent turns absolute when it discloses a specifically human truth of a specific history of a people. He denies this disclosure of truth to the realm of nature (and a quasi-Kantian divide between human and natural history emerges here). In a racist move, Heidegger equates the inhabitants of Africa whom he calls “Kaffern” [kaffirs] with the animalistic realm of apes and birds:

Nature too—the organic and inorganic—has a history. But how do we come to say that the negroes (*Kaffern*) are without history? They have after all a history like the apes and the birds. Or has the earth, the plants, and the animals perhaps not a history after all? Admittedly, it seems incontrovertible that what passes away automatically belongs to a past; but not everything needs to enter history, which passes away and thus belongs to the past. What about the turning of a propeller? This may turn on a daily basis—but essentially (*eigentlich*) nothing happens. If the airplane, however, transports the *Führer* from Munich to Mussolini in Venice, then history takes place. (*Gesamtausgabe* 85)

Here we witness one of Heidegger’s first formulations of the contrast between the properly historical world of a people and the time-bound but history-less realm of nature. History seems to be premised on the successes and failures of specific Western nations. That Heidegger denies non-Western people humanity and that he thus questions whether they are a people is racist: it literally divides us into either the animalistic or the properly human. In later work, Heidegger abandons his racist conceptualisation of history, but the distinction between the merely natural and the properly human to some (and perhaps defensible) extent remains intact. This distinction calls into doubt Heidegger’s credentials as a non-exploitative deep ecologist. The critique of technology is already part of his appraisal of the truth of legitimately human history, for the aeroplane that transports Hitler is itself as insignificant as the history-less time of nature.

Heidegger takes issue with technology as something that is not essentially human but quasi-natural: neither the technological achievement of an aeroplane pro-

pellor nor a stone characterise humanity but the history-making trip of the Führer to another fascist leader, Mussolini, does so. What Heidegger seems to be saying is that modern concentration on the technological is not pertinent to the distinctive historical truth that distinguishes the human from the non-human sphere. In “The Origin of the Work of Art”, Heidegger establishes a threefold connection between history, people-hood and world that constitutes humanity and separates it from the merely natural realm of the earth: “The world is the self-disclosing openness of the broad paths of the simple and essential decisions in the destiny of an historical people” (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 47). As Jeff Malpas has pointed out, after World War II Heidegger significantly includes the earth in the more inclusive account of the fourfold universe which embraces men, world, earth and gods (see Malpas 232). Heidegger developed his philosophy of poetry during the thirties and early forties, however, and his conception of art originates in a stark divide that separates history and humanity (world) from the merely natural with which he seems to associate non-Western people (earth). History seems to endow Occidental people with a specific task or *telos* and this makes them, for Heidegger, truly human: “History is the transporting of a people into its appointed task as entrance into that people’s endowment” (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 74). Without history, a people seems to cease being a people; then it is dis- or non-endowed. The thrown state of our existence implies that we cannot find a task that is intrinsic to us and instead we have to construct one. History is then the work of such contingent construction that is always subject to failure. According to Heidegger, art constructs and reveals the historical task of a people:

Art is historical, and as historical it is the creative preserving of truth in the work. Art happens as poetry. Poetry is founding in the triple sense of bestowing, grounding, and beginning. Art as founding is essentially historical. This means not only that art has a history in the external sense that in the course of time it, too, appears along with many other things, and in the process changes and passes away and offers changing aspects for historiology. Art is history in the essential sense that it grounds history. (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 47)

Here Heidegger spends some time elaborating art’s specific significance for history: it is not only subject to historical changes but it also determines these changes. This means that there would not be any history without art: art establishes or founds history and art responds to the contingent or arbitrarily thrown state of our existence by the autonomous foundation of a task which might succeed or fail in transcending arbitrariness. Truth is then the success or failure of such a foundation.

Art responds to the arbitrary throw that is our existence by a leap into history as a people’s autonomous self-construction within poetry. According to Heidegger, a people and its history originates within and is maintained by the art of poetry: “To originate something by a leap, to bring something into being from out of the source of its nature in a founding leap—this is what the word origin (German *Ursprung*, literally, ‘primal leap’) means” (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 47). The origin of the work of art thus is the leap as denoted by the “-sprung” of the German word “Ur-

sprung” [origin]. It is a leap from the arbitrarily thrown into the art of history and politics: “The origin of the work of art—that is, the origin of both the creators and the preservers, which is to say of people’s historical existence, is art” (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 47). Here Heidegger conflates art with the people; art and the people establish and preserve human history and thus reveal and maintain truth. Art is the truth of a people’s historical existence “because art is by its nature an origin: a distinctive way in which truth comes into being, that it becomes historical” (Heidegger, *Poetry* 47). Heidegger conceptualises truth, paradoxically, as the risk and contingency implicit in historical foundations. These foundations reveal humanity’s truth because they attempt to overcome the quasi-natural condition of our existence which, as purely natural, is comparable to that of the stone: thrown somewhere and while lying there still subject to being further dislodged. In his lectures on Hölderlin’s “The Ister”, Heidegger implicitly contrasts the fluid and highly unstable situation of being thrown with the etymological meaning of the German word for writing poetry:

‘To poetize’, *dichten*—in Latin *dictare*—means to write down, to fore-tell something to be written down. To tell something that, prior to this, has not yet been told. A properly unique beginning thus lies in whatever is said poetically. (*Hölderlin’s Hymn “The Ister”* 9)

Here Heidegger interprets poetry in a way similar to Benjamin, as a new cosmos or a properly unique beginning. The new beginning in question here is, however, different from Benjamin’s radically novel cosmos that cannot be compared, let alone equated with, a people or any historical formation.

Both Heidegger and Benjamin depict poetry as a form of birth. Their respective understandings of birth differ, however. As has been discussed in the previous section, Benjamin identifies the origin of transformation in mental rather than physical space: in the transcendently conditioned *a priori* existence of the poem where everything that bears resemblance to the status quo (the people) is merely a function of this radically new cosmos of what he calls the poetised. Heidegger, in contrast to Benjamin, makes poetry a function of the people and their history. According to Heidegger, Hölderlin’s poetry serves the function of establishing and revealing the history of the German people. Heidegger reads Hölderlin’s fascination with rivers like the Danube or the Rhine as an attempt towards establishing “‘symbolic images’ of German essence and life” (*Hölderlin’s Hymn “The Ister”* 18). In his discussion of Hölderlin’s poem “Andenken” [Remembrance], Heidegger equates the essence of poetry, which he calls “das *Dichterische*”, with the foundation of national and historical identity: he describes the poet creating the poetic on which dwells as on its ground historical humanity (*Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtung* 106). In a further metaphysical move, Heidegger equates the recalling of a marriage ceremony in the south of France with the birth of German identity, declaring that the marriage ceremony is the hidden birthday of history, that is to say, the history here of the German people (107). Clearly Heidegger de-individualises the

reality of Hölderlin's poem. The birthday in question here remembers the birth of a national existence, that of the German people.

Both Benjamin as well as Heidegger conceive of poetry in terms of new beginnings, of a birth that establishes something new. By turning the poem into a function of history, politics and national identity, Heidegger however aligns the poetic with the bio-political. The birth in question is that of a people and not that of diverse human flourishing. As Adorno and more recently Lacoue-Labarthe have clearly shown, in his attempt to cast the poem as the function of historical and national identity, Heidegger distorts—all protestations to the contrary—the literal, physical and often erotic description of Hölderlin's poetry (Lacoue-Labarthe 40–43). He thus reads Hölderlin's expression of gratitude to German women as a trigger for the remembrance of the erotic allure of Bordeaux's "brown women" as the divine essence of Germanness. Nothing could be further away from what Hölderlin's poem says in the lines "Thank the German women! They have preserved / The friendly spirit of the gods' images for us" (Lacoue-Labarthe 41). The gods in question are the "brown women" of Bordeaux, of which the German women are a remembrance. Heidegger, however, turns this memory of erotic quasi-divine attraction into the quasi-theological celebration of an anthropocentric conception of the divine as the German people. In Heidegger's account, poetry is thus no independent entity, but one that serves political and historical interests. As his misreading of the erotic aspects of Hölderlin's poetry has shown, Heidegger leaps from the poetic to historically and politically grounded notions of authority and hierarchy in reading women as images of the quasi-divine status of the German people. One could say that Heidegger has endowed Hölderlin's poetry with the pseudo-theological aura of historical and political truth claims.

In the wake of Nazism's rise to power, Benjamin defines and critiques what he calls aura in his famous essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction". As Alys Eve Weinbaum has recently shown, aura plays a political role. It pretends to transmit a community's authentic history and identity, which is exactly what Heidegger discovers is poetry's revelation of truth:

Aura is initially associated with "historical testimony," "authority," and "authenticity". However, after first introducing the concept [. . .], Benjamin continually returns to, augments, and reworks it so that aura eventually becomes associated not only with these attributes but also with its pretence of their presence, with their spectral effect. In other words, while aura initially names that which "withers" or "decays," it later comes to name that which is artificially produced to replace or fill-in where a loss of "authority" or "authenticity" is identified or felt. (Weinbaum 217)

Initially Benjamin describes aura as art's cultic value and, as Weinbaum has clearly shown, cultic value can be produced technologically. Technology is capable of presenting the illusion of a modern form of aura, as occurs in fascist and other totalitarian forms of propaganda. Significantly, Benjamin defines cult not in terms of religious creeds but as the confirmation of established notions of authority, hierarchy, identity and authenticity. Aura presents a quasi-religious or cultic sense of

continuity: it attempts to make authentic a people's history and identity and this is precisely what Heidegger sees as being revealed by the truth of art. He describes aura as the authenticity of a given object as the quintessence of that which has been its tradition from its point of origin covering its material duration as well as its historical testimony (Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* 447). According to Benjamin, technology's as well as poetry's potential consists in a disruption of history's continuity. By breaking the link between the work of art and the aura of its tradition and history, mechanical reproduction helps give birth to the new cosmos of the poem whose liberating potential Benjamin celebrates in his early essay on Hölderlin. As we have seen, the early Benjamin sees the poem as a mental sphere where humanity can establish new beginnings precisely because it offers a space unconstrained by the violence and the practices of exclusion that characterise the status quo. The status quo is of course part of our traditional sense of history and politics whereas the new cosmos created by poetry interrupts this continuity of exclusion, in a way comparable to that in which mechanical reproduction has the potential to democratise traditional forms of production and perception. Hansen has emphasised the relevance of Benjamin's reflections on the democratising as well as transformative potential of mechanical reproducibility for our digital age, which increases the democratic availability of works of art:

Moreover, if the masses' desire to have things closer, as it were, ready-to-hand, is epitomized today by the practice of watching a film on a mobile phone, the phenomenology of cinematic spectatorship—watching a film projected on a big screen in the darkened theatre space, being absorbed into something larger than yourself—increasingly bears affinity with auratic experience. And Benjamin's claim to the effect that the technological media blur traditional dividing lines between authors and readers, as between actors and viewers, thus enabling a democratization of culture, would be more than borne out by digital media that make us users and agents in simulated situations rather than spectators of prerecorded representations. (Hansen 202)

The poetic and the technological have the capacity to include those whom history and politics have kept excluding, such as the marginal minorities, outsiders who have been stigmatised as sick or scandalous.

As Jacques Rancière has argued, this democratic paradigm shift signalling the inclusion of those on the margins of society does not emerge from technology but from literature. In an attempt to correct Benjamin's thesis about technical reproducibility, Rancière writes: "The appearance of the masses on the scene of history or in 'new' images is not to be confused with the link between the age of the masses and the age of science and technology" (34). Benjamin's thesis is indeed in agreement with Rancière's argument about a paradigm shift introduced not by technology and science but by literature, because, as we have seen in this article, the early Benjamin locates such a shift in what he calls the poeticised. His late essay on the work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility further develops this point by arguing that technology does not so much create as radicalise and

amplify the democratic promises of the aesthetic. The essay closes with a famous contrast between fascism and communism, in which his understanding of communism is highly idiosyncratic, because it turns art into the substance and centre of the communist revolution. It is quite astonishing that we encounter early Benjamin's uncompromising stance on art as a condition of its own making in his conceptualisation of communism. This is so because Benjamin in the thirties morphs art into the heart of a communist revolution that has the potential to disrupt history as the continued and continual state of guilt, debt, exploitation and exclusion. According to the later Benjamin, fascism focuses on the aesthetisation of politics and communism responds with the politicisation of art (*Gesammelte Schriften* 508). Benjamin's claim that fascism aestheticises politics can easily be backed up with historical evidence: the Nazis indeed used modern technology in order to endow their politics with aura. His understanding of communism is, however, highly idiosyncratic.

Was art indeed at the heart of communism and the ground on which it was built? This question has to be left open for, as we have seen, Benjamin attempts to revolutionise our conception of art. What is revolutionary about his revision of art is that he emphasises its natal and not, as has traditionally been done, its mimetic capacities. Heidegger's bio-political interpretation of poetry as ground, revelation and representation of a people's history still clings to a conception of the aesthetic as mimetic. In a sense, Heidegger's work on Hölderlin's poetry exemplifies what Benjamin criticises as the subordination of art to the ideological commandments of existing politics. Benjamin is concerned with the social impact of art but in ways different to Heidegger. Rather than subordinating art to historical forces of politics and economics, he makes us see its intrinsic revolutionary potential. Art emerges as the force behind new beginnings that disrupt the violence and the exclusions that are part of history's continuity. Art creates a non-exclusive mental space that has the potential to shape new political fields where society promotes non-exclusive human flourishing.

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